

23 “Stay home, be safe, and be kind”: University of Auckland’s Italian course goes online in a week

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Abstract

On March 23rd, at the University of Auckland (New Zealand), all lectures were suspended for a week. During this time, both students and staff made a considerable effort to prepare the online delivery of courses. In this chapter we discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the Italian beginners courses offered in Semester 1. With no certainty of when the campus would reopen, and with the well-being of students always considered as a priority, the courses were quickly adapted for distance learning. This change involved multiple aspects and the experience gained, denoted by urgency and flexibility, proving to be a precious resource to face the second semester and, above all, a less predictable and more frightening future; in which not only safety and adaptability, but kindness and mutual respect, should also be the keywords. Designing blended, easily migratable online courses that make use of both technology and up-to-date approaches to language teaching has emerged as a viable strategy for an uncertain future.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, resources, Italian, New Zealand.

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1. Introduction

In the Faculty of Arts, the School of Cultures, Languages, and Linguistics (CLL) represents the centre for studying European and Asian languages, literatures and cultures, language teaching, linguistics, and translation at the University of Auckland. A variety of Italian language courses are offered for undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral students wanting to learn to speak, read, and write Italian from beginner to advanced levels. In particular, the undergraduate language acquisition courses are delivered in three stages (beginners, intermediate, and advanced), divided into two progressive levels (1 and 2), and normally carried out in three years.

2. Objectives

In this chapter we will deal with the impact of COVID-19 on Italian beginners courses offered at Stage 1 in Semester 1, between March and July 2020: *Introductory Italian Language* (Italian 100-G) and *Italian Language for Beginners 1* (Italian 106-G). Particular attention will be paid to *Italian 106-G*, as the author of this chapter had personal experience as the tutor² of this course, working side by side with the coordinator of Italian language acquisition courses. By adopting a descriptive and participatory perspective, we will discuss how this course was quickly restructured to be completely remotely delivered, what obstacles and strengths have emerged, and what suggestions for the future came to light.

3. A different beginning

On March 2nd, 2020, the first semester of the new academic year began at the University of Auckland and, from the very start, it was clear that teaching was not going to be as usual. In fact, just three days earlier, on February 28th, the first case of COVID-19 coronavirus in New Zealand had been reported. The World

2. At that time, I was a doctoral student in Italian and I worked as a graduate teaching assistant for the Italian language acquisition courses at CLL.

Health Organization had already declared the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, later renamed COVID-19, as a global health emergency and, on February 3rd, New Zealand had temporarily banned the entry of foreigners from, or those who had travelled through, mainland China. Soon after, anyone who might have been at high risk of exposure had to remain isolated for two weeks. Therefore, although in-class lectures were normally held in the first three weeks of the semester, the impact of COVID-19 had already marked some significant changes on several levels, not least the general climate of precariousness, anxiety, and concern widespread among students and staff, both inside and outside the classroom.

In preparation for the start of the courses, all students were provided briefing information and updates about COVID-19 and its possible impact on their studies. At that time all activities of the University of Auckland were functioning normally as there was no increased risk of contracting the coronavirus from being on campus. However, following the advice of the health authorities, hygiene practices were encouraged and health supplies allocated throughout the campus in order to reduce exposure. Those among students and staff who were feeling unwell or suffering from respiratory infections of any kind and flu-like symptoms were strongly advised to contact a doctor or a health professional immediately and try to isolate themselves from others in the meantime. A health line for counselling was established. Notably the university administration also intensely promoted the practice of kindness, respect, care, and support for each one, without discriminating against those who already wore a facemask or preferred not to come to campus in person anymore. This general emphasis on respect and kindness, as well as the rhetoric of personal and mutual safety are part of the procedures adopted by the New Zealand Government to enforce popular and political consensus to their response to the pandemic.

4. Italian beginners courses

The two Italian acquisition courses for beginners available in Semester 1, *Italian 100-G* and *Italian 106-G*, are very similar in terms of curriculum and assessments, but differ in the way they are structured and taught.

Students who attend *Italian 106-G* are expected to attend four contact hours in the classroom; additionally, they need to practise at home by doing activities and homework from the workbook, which serve in preparation for ten weekly online mini-tests. The expectation is that students commit ten hours a week for this course, including class time and personal study. In addition to mini-tests, two in-class group activities, two in-class tests, a final oral exam, and a final written exam count in different percentages towards the final course mark.

Italian 100-G is a blended learning course introduced in 2019, after being team-developed during the previous year. It involves a hybrid approach that combines two hours of classroom contact per week and four to five hours of e-learning on the *In Italia con Giacomo app*³, available online through all fixed and portable digital devices. In this app, Giacomo (an electric Vespa) acts as a travel companion and learning guide. In addition, two or more hours of independent study are required to reach a total of ten hours of study per week.

While the adopted textbook, classroom tests, and final exams are similar to those of *Italian 106-G*, the classroom activities, both marked and unmarked, are designed to meet the need for a differently structured course. Another novelty introduced in 2019 was a virtual café, a space for discussion and sharing among students made available on the Canvas⁴ course page. The experience gained in designing and implementing online teaching and learning materials for this blended course proved to be one of the most valuable resources to facilitate and accelerate the transition to full remote teaching of Italian courses for beginners.

Hundred students were enrolled in the Italian beginners course in Semester 1: 29 students in *Italian 106-G*, divided into two streams, and 71 in *Italian 100-G*, divided into four streams. For the first three weeks the course coordinator tutored one stream of *106-G* and three streams of *100-G*, and I was the tutor for the other two streams. Special arrangements had been in place for a small group of students who were unable to attend classes because they could not enter

3. In Italia con Giacomo is a digital learning resource of CLL available to students enrolled in Italian 100-G at the URL <https://giacomo.arts.auckland.ac.nz/admin/index.php>

4. Canvas is the web-based learning management system used by the University of Auckland.

New Zealand or were in temporary isolation as a precaution due to COVID-19. A remote teaching group was thus set up for those students enrolled in *Italian 106-G* (two students) or *Italian 100-G* (four students), as a temporary solution until they could return to class. Regardless of their belonging to one course rather than the other, these students followed the *Italian 100-G* programme, more suitable than the *106-G Italian* programme for online delivery, and their in-class attendance was replaced by the *Giacomo* app. The teaching material was sent via email in pdf form, while all the lectures were recorded daily (voice and computer screen only) and uploaded to the Canvas course page for asynchronous online learning. Students also addressed specific questions and asked for in-depth explanations during the weekly live tutorials exclusively dedicated to them.

5. One week to go online

By mid-March, the exponential speed of the spread of the virus in New Zealand began to cause worry, resulting in a series of increasingly restrictive social measures to contain it. On March 19th all indoor gatherings of over 100 people were prohibited and the borders closed to all but New Zealand citizens and permanent residents. On March 21st 2020 the Government introduced a four-tiered alert level system and the Prime Minister announced that New Zealand was at Alert Level 2. At that point, the situation around the campus was extremely precarious, with a very strong feeling in the air that it was not a given that we would meet again in class at the next lesson. Indeed, 48 hours later on March 25th the whole nation went into lockdown and a State of National Emergency was declared, which lasted until June 8th when, having no more active cases of COVID-19, New Zealand returned to Alert Level 1.

Like the other New Zealand tertiary institutions, the university of Auckland was unprepared for this scenario; however, foreseeing a possible change in the COVID-19 alert level and a subsequent campus closure, they had already suspended all teaching for the week of March 23rd-27th. While the pause button was pressed on the lessons, all efforts focused on the preparations and

adjustments needed to speed up the process of reaching a full digital teaching and learning mode.

During those 48 hours (and the rest of the week off-campus), the university provided academic staff with the support they needed to be ready for an improvised remote delivery starting Week 4 (March 30th), both via online delivery and with face-to-face sessions. Examples of such support are: video tutorials; live training webinars; workshops for installing and using Zoom⁵; faculty drop-in sessions dedicated to Canvas and other support for remote learning; and university drop-in sessions for remote work issues using a personal device (such as installing a Virtual Private Network (VPN) service⁶).

The transition from face-to-face to full online teaching was swift and substantially completed during this *teaching-free week*, with subsequent improvements derived from the experience gained in the first weeks of online teaching, shared among the CLL language tutors, and enriched with valuable feedback received from students. By Friday, March 27th, we uploaded a fully revised plan for both *Italian 100-G* and *Italian 106-G* onto Canvas, with new dates and deadlines, as all academic activities had been pushed one week back. Secondly, after a successful trial with Zoom, we communicated to the students the video-conferencing links for the Zoom live sessions, which replaced both the contact and office hours. Finally, we established new formats for the group projects assessed, the in-class tests and the oral and written final exams. This rapid shift to online teaching and learning transformed the courses in various respects, such as teaching, didactic materials, assessments, relationships with students, and well-being. We will analyse them more closely in the next paragraphs, referring mainly to *Italian 106-G*.

5. Zoom is a cloud-based video conferencing service for which the University of Auckland acquired an institution-wide licence.

6. The VPN service is available to all staff, postgraduate students, and authorised contractors of the University of Auckland. It is needed in order to establish a secure connection to the university network from outside and to access certain resources when working from home, travelling on university business, working from a remote site, or accessing internal university resources not publicly accessible through the internet.

6. One teacher, one class

First, we agreed to reassign courses to tutors differently. The course coordinator took over all the streams of *Italian 100-G*, while I was responsible for *Italian 106-G*. With this decision, we aimed to offer an online teaching as consistent as possible through to the end of the semester. Furthermore, while the *100-G* students remained divided into four virtual classrooms, the fewer *106-G* students were merged into a single virtual classroom, which also included the initial remote teaching group.

Beginning with Week 4, all lectures at the University of Auckland were recorded and made available online to meet the needs of those students who might have limited access to high-speed broadband, experience issues with internet connectivity, or face additional challenges related to equipment, study space, and other physical constraints. In our particular case, the small size of the Italian beginners classes allowed us to replace the contact hours in the classroom with hours of live video conference via Zoom. Therefore, we provided distance learning both in real time and asynchronously.

The first challenge was to mitigate the anxiety, both of the instructor and of the students, caused by the transition from face-to-face to digital lessons that could often be disrupted by a number of minor technological issues. Suddenly the public space of the lesson and the private space of the house were intertwined, resulting in a series of frequent and minor inconveniences that in the long run, instead of disturbing the teaching, helped to make lessons homely, friendly, and relaxed. A second challenge was represented by the difficulty in promoting attendance and engagement in the virtual class. Not only was the requirement of minimum class attendance for admission to final exams being waived due to current special circumstances, but the availability of fully recorded and downloadable lessons also increased the number of absent students. Moreover, many of the students, possibly for both logistical and personal reasons, preferred not to turn on the camera and hardly participated if not directly asked to do so. This was a crucial problem, common not only to the other Italian Beginner course but also to the other language courses taught at CLL, heartily discussed in

the tutors' online forum, which nevertheless led to different individual solutions and indeed, offers food for thought and research for the future. Our choice was not to push anyone into turning on the video camera but rather to encourage students to feel as comfortable as possible, without renouncing to challenge everyone to be actively involved in class activities. This entailed a considerable effort from the instructor, who often had to engage with face-less nicknames that did not correspond to the names in the class list. There was a risk that only a small group would proactively contribute to the lesson, but, over time, an increased confidence in the new format and a series of ice-breaking group activities enhanced the atmosphere. The breakout rooms, in particular, proved to be a very useful Zoom function, as it allowed to divide the class into small groups to complete specific activities. During these group moments, aimed at strengthening communication and interaction skills, the students lowered their affective filter, feeling relieved of class performance anxiety and encouraged by peer collaboration and mutual correction. By the end of the semester, everyone ended up participating in the lessons at least a little. Thus, the alienating feeling of teaching not only grammar, but also social communication and pragmatics in a new language diminished as Zoom's black boxes and disembodied voices became recognisable, albeit virtual and often invisible, students.

7. Digital teaching material

Zoom offers a variety of digital tools that help the teacher digitally replicate much of what happens in a real classroom. For example, in addition to projecting textbook pages and slides via the screen connection tool, it is easy to write and draw on a whiteboard, use a dual monitor, share files, create breakout rooms in which to assign a variable number of students for exercises in pairs, group work, and also oral tests. Following the students' suggestions, the chat tool was also employed more often to communicate particular instructions and solutions to exercises not always made clear by voice.

The textbook (Marin & Magnelli, 2010) adopted in both classes *100-G* and *106-G* was digitised in high quality to be shared by the teacher during the video lessons.

Furthermore, the website of Edilingua publishing house offers much searchable and downloadable content, such as the index and glossary, audio tracks, videos and online activities, educational games and other extra activities, progress tests, and workbook solutions. Some of them are available for free, while others require a code, which is included with the purchase of the hard copy or e-book. Moreover, both instructors and students can find all the workbook exercises, together with a series of resources and tools, on the interactive platform *i-d-e-e*⁷.

8. Assessment

All assessment tools that count for the final grade had to be quickly adapted to a digital format, via Zoom or Canvas.

Miniprogetto 1 and 2, which usually engages students in a collaborative and creative group activity designed for the development of communicative skills in Italian, became instead a written discussion on Canvas. The initial idea of asking the student to record and upload short audio/video was subsequently abandoned due to technical problems⁸. Although the remote assessment of language tasks allowed for less spontaneity than the classroom activity itself and was more exposed to possible plagiarism, it still proved important as an ice-breaking activity and as a stimulus to socialisation, more important than ever now that students were isolated in their own homes and had fewer opportunities for interaction with both the instructor and peers.

The two *in-class tests* were replaced by online quizzes (closed-book), released at a set time, which, as per university guidelines, were available for 24 hours and not timed. On the one hand, the traditional paper version was easily transformed into a quiz on Canvas, which offers numerous options for designing different

7. *i-d-e-e* (italiano digitale edizioni edilingua) is an educational platform created for teachers and students of Italian. It offers a blended learning environment that combines printed material and classroom lessons with different tools and digital learning material available on line.

8. During some trials, recording and uploading video files and sometimes even audio only to the Canvas page often caused the system to freeze, so you had to start over. In anticipation of the page being used by more than 100 users, we have simplified this assessment by asking students to enter only the written dialogue.

types of question, such as multiple choice, true/false, fill-in-the-blank, matching, cloze, essay, text. On the other hand, this format did not guarantee the same reliability as those tests conducted in the classroom and supervised by the tutor, and, overall, it did not seem to be the ideal solution.

The *final oral test* was initially uncertain but, given the excellent digital performance of the students in the Zoom breakout rooms, it was then decided to conduct it in pairs via real-time Zoom sessions. For this occasion only, the students were compelled to have their cameras turned on. This assessment evaluates not only the oral skills achieved in the course but also the ability to converse with a peer in an already experienced communicative situation and, if necessary, to improvise. A good number of students were prepared in this sense and took the exam as if they were in a real class, while the rest memorised a pre-written dialogue, or in some cases, they read it. In one case, with two students based in China, the Zoom connection was so bad that we opted for a group video call on WeChat as a backup plan.

The university decided that there were to be no on-site tests or examinations for the rest of Semester 1, and these were replaced by take-home assessment exercises conducted online, held during the examination period, and open for 24 hours in order to allow for technical challenges or time zone differences. According to these guidelines, the *final written exam* was redesigned as a Canvas quiz that tested the learning outcomes of the course. The 24 hour window also accommodated students who are usually granted additional time to complete a test or examination. For those with disability-related support needs that are not met by additional time alone – as happened for one student of *Italian 106-G* – an alternative solution was found. The final test was problematic in at least two respects. The first was that, despite the numerous announcements and invitations to check the Canvas course pages regularly for important information regarding revised assessment plans, a few students got the date wrong and failed to complete the test within 24 hours. Given the exceptional circumstances, they were still allowed to take the test. The second problem concerned academic integrity, because the online home delivery of the test exposed the risk of academic misconduct, use of online resources, and

help received from third parties. Once again, in such a time of uncertainty and challenge for both students and instructors, we decided to value trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility, with the idea of completely redesigning the test in the future.

9. Discussion

From the first week of online teaching, we created a stimulating and non-stressful environment through the didactic use of grammar and cultural games, informal suggestions on how to practise the language outside the classroom in a fun way, and several cooperative, not graded, communicative tasks. The function of *ludic language teaching* in reinforcing cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional skills (Balboni, 2008, p. 40) was not neglected in the virtual space of Zoom. On the contrary, it turned out to be an effective means of socialising remotely, reducing the stress of online performance, and ultimately improving language acquisition.

Awareness of the role of a rich, varied, and stimulating communicative input in promoting and developing competence in a foreign language, guided remote didactic communication not unlike what would have happened in the classroom. The social dynamics of the class group were also monitored and oriented by the instructor, who favoured the creation of exchange networks among the learners and encouraged different types of communication, beyond the sole transmission of information content (Vedovelli, 2002, p. 123).

The courses were delivered online until the end of the semester, which ended on a positive note with the country lifting the lockdown. A final social coffee was organised on June 12th, on the recently reopened campus. So, we were eventually able to see each other in person, wrap up the course, and prepare for the final test with a series of activities that we had not been able to do on Zoom. The final results certainly benefited from the decision of the university to scale up one grade step for all undergraduate and postgraduate final grades as a way to recognise the disruptions caused by COVID-19 to all students' study in

Semester 1. However, they were also a sign that everyone, tutors and students, had committed to getting through the end of such a challenging semester.

10. Conclusion

The experience gained during Semester 1 of 2020, marked by both urgency and flexibility, and the effort to make both course content and assignments available online, was not in vain. On the contrary, it proved effective for facing the second half of the academic year, when in-class lessons have alternated with online teaching periods following the changes in COVID-19 alert levels.

Several cues for future reflection and research clearly emerged. Designing blended courses that can be completely transformed into online resources if necessary will certainly be one of the directions to take. Moreover, the possibility of systematically collecting and examining student feedback, as well as the online teaching experiences of other language courses, will provide a more complete critical perspective and provide suggestions for improving the teaching approach.

Although New Zealand has become a global example of an effective response to the pandemic, managing to keep cases of community transmission to almost zero and a very low number of deaths due to COVID-19, the situation remains precarious and worrying. What the sudden and rapid transition to digital teaching and learning taught us is to be flexible and open to new approaches and technology. Above all we learned that cooperation, respect, and kindness are paramount when apprehending a new language and culture in an unpredictable and hostile world.

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